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PROVINCE I SYNOD FOCUSES ON MINISTRY

by Sylvan Heath

PORTLAND, Maine -- "The direction and destination of our ministry remain the same because they come from God. What changes is the countryside through which we pass," keynote speaker Philip Turner told the 1980 Synod of the Province of New England (Province I), meeting here, October 28-29.

Focusing on the theme, "Changes in Our Understanding of Ministry," the gathering was attended by 150 representatives of the Episcopal Dioceses of Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Western Massachusetts. Representatives of the Provincial Episcopal Churchwomen, which met concurrently, were present for much of the Synod.

Legislation enacted by the Synod included a resolution asking Provincial Council to review the program and structure of the Province, in order that it might be "renewed for its continued ministry in the service of Jesus Christ," and a budget change allocating funds for "education and training for total ministry development."

Turner, Professor of Christian Ethics at the General Theological Seminary, New York City, reminded the gathering in the keynote address of the goal of our ministry as described in Philippians 2: that the mind of Christ be the mind of the Church, and that the whole cosmos come to the knowledge and love of God. The forms and patterns which our ministry takes, he continued, must reflect our beliefs, and this must be true at all levels of our common life: national, provincial, diocesan and parish.

Turner suggested five "diagnostic signs" which can reveal whether our structures and programs are consistent with our beliefs; the integrity of our systems will be reflected in the balance among these activities:

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Worship: "We have a new Prayer Book -- we have not yet learned to use it. We must work to make our worship fitting both to God and to the terrain through which we travel."

Evangelism: "The greatest thing we can offer to God's creatures is the knowledge and love of God; if we do not do this we turn our back on Christ."

Service: "The love of God gives us that miracle, our neighbor."

Intercession: "Is there in your parish a core of people who day in and day out bang on God's door?"

Formation: "We must consider how we are going to teach the faithful and become a literate people. This will require enormous effort."

Synod participants entered into dialogue with Turner's ideas by working in small groups, and later by addressing their groups' questions to him. A number of questions were raised in response to Turner's assertion that the most powerful setting for Christian formation is in "domestic ritual" -- sharing the stories, prayers and celebrations of the community -- of the kind which has bound the Jewish people together throughout their history.

The spirit as well as the content of the keynote address was evident in the legislative session which concluded the Synod. There was concern that the Church examine its understanding of ministry, and find new structures adapted to the "countryside" through which we are moving.

Provincial Council was charged with the task of evaluating the work of the Province, developing new approaches, and reporting to the 1981 Synod. Proposals for specific changes were referred to the evaluating group. The budget item for the Parish Training Program, which for 10 years has provided supervised summer training for seminarians, was changed to make the funds available for "education and training for total ministry development." The changing needs of seminarians was cited as the primary reason for reviewing this highly regarded program; it was suggested that this might provide a useful model for the supervised training of lay ministers.

In other action, the Synod heard reports on Partnership in Mission, ecumenical relations, evangelism, draft registration counseling, and youth ministry, and authorized changes in the management of the Province's funds for better stewardship of its resources.

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The work of the Synod was offered to God in a Eucharist celebrated in the Cathedral of St. Luke. Officiating was the Rt. Rev. Frederick Wolf, Bishop of Maine and President of the Province, assisted by Bishops Morris Arnold of Massachusetts, George Hunt of Rhode Island, Robert Kerr of Vermont, Philip Smith of New Hampshire, Alexander Stewart of Western Massachusetts, and Arthur Walmsley of Connecticut.

In his homily, Bishop Wolf spoke of the "synergy" which results when parts of the Church join together, generating far more creative energy than exists in the individual components.

The overall flow of the Synod event was designed and coordinated by the Provincial Christian Education network, using the "Shared Christian Praxis" model present at the National Event for Church Educators held in San Antonio earlier this year.

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